

I say that not to be somber but just as a cautionary reminder that it's easy to assume, when things are going well, that it is part of the natural order of things and that it will always be so—without regard to what actions we take, what words we speak, what hopes we harbor in our hearts. In a year, I will be a private citizen; most of you will still be serving. Remember that. We have the chance of a lifetime, and I, for one, have waited 35 years for my country to have that chance. It's a great honor for all of us to serve.

I offer you a toast and the fond hope that you will make the most of it.

Thank you very much.

[At this point, the President offered a toast.]

The President. Governor Leavitt, the podium is yours.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:38 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Michael O. Leavitt of Utah, chairman, and Gov. Parris N. Glendening of Maryland, vice chairman, National Governors' Association, and their wives, Jacalyn and Frances, respectively; and Governors Tommy G. Thompson of Wisconsin, James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina, and Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Governor Leavitt.

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion With the National Governors' Association

February 28, 2000

The President. Thank you. Good morning, Governor Leavitt, Governor Glendening. It's a great pleasure for me to be here with many members of my Cabinet and my Chief of Staff, John Podesta, and Mickey Ibarra, who does such a good job of working with all of you. Hillary and I especially enjoyed the time we spent at dinner last night, and I hope you did as well.

Over the last 7 years, I've tried to build a genuine partnership with all of you, based on greater resources, greater flexibility, and a greater commitment to shared goals. I think we could all agree that the results have been good: welfare rolls cut in half; 2 million chil-

dren enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program; 150,000 young people in AmeriCorps; our schools improving.

This year we'll have a lot to do. Among other things, we have to work hard to make sure that we count every American in the census.

We begin the new century on a high note. In the last 3 months of 1999, economic growth was 6.9 percent, the fastest in more than a decade. This month, expansion has lengthened to the point that we are enjoying the longest economic period of growth we've ever had. Our social fabric, also, is on the mend: the lowest crime level in 25 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the lowest female unemployment rates in 40 years, and the lowest African-American and Hispanic unemployment rates ever recorded.

I believe that in this new economy, Government's role is to give the American people the tools and the conditions they need to make their way and to advance our Nation's progress: fiscal discipline; investments in education and technology; new markets for American products and services.

Today we're going to have a roundtable discussion of three issues vital to our continued success: health care; trade; and the impact of the digital technology on the new economy. We'll also talk about what we've already done and what more we can do to help American families cope with rising home heating oil prices, especially in the Northeast, and the prospect of other oil-related price increases.

On Friday I sent a supplemental appropriations request to Congress to replenish the LIHEAP funds to help more hard-hit families through this crisis and to ensure that there's enough money in the fund for others who may need help later in the year, when the weather gets hot.

Since January, we've allocated \$295 million to help people in need. In addition to making up that shortfall and ensuring there are sufficient funds for the future, we're also requesting \$19 million in additional funds for the Department of Energy's weatherization programs, to help increase energy efficiency of homes and reduce energy costs for families, and we're requesting resources to help

make \$86 million in SBA loans available to small home heating oil distributors, so that they will be able to extend the kind of flexible payment terms to customers hard hit by the recent price spike that so many utilities do today.

I urge Governors who are receiving these LIHEAP funds to adjust eligibility standards also to cover as many low and moderate income families as possible and to keep in mind that States can use temporary assistance for needy family funds to provide emergency heating assistance to very low income families with children.

We've also directed the Coast Guard to expedite deliveries of home heating oil. And as I think all of you know, Secretary Richardson is conducting a 60-day study of diversifying energy supplies and possibly converting factories and other major oil users to other fuels to free up oil supplies for home heating use. And, in anticipation of other potential price spikes in other parts of the oil market, we are asking refiners to keep producing at full throttle until the crisis has passed.

Finally, I hope that we will begin a discussion about how to make our economy even more energy efficient, so we're not so dependent on the ups and downs of supplies or so affected by future oil prices.

Whether in response to an earthquake, a flood, a hurricane, a farm crisis, our people always pull together at times like this; and for those of you like me, who come from different parts of the country, I can tell you that the families in the Northeast need our help now, and we're going to do what we can to provide it.

Before we begin our roundtable discussion, let me just say a few words about the other issues that are important to every Governor in this room and every citizen in our Nation: education reform, the current debate over how best to provide a Medicare prescription drug option for our seniors, and environmental stewardship.

Over the past 7 years, as we have turned the deficits into surplus and now are on our way to being debt-free in 13 years. We have also nearly doubled our investment in schools and demanded more in return, working hard, along with you, for higher standards, greater

accountability, and extra help to the children who need it. Virtually every State has embraced that approach. Last year, with your help, we enacted landmark school accountability legislation to provide \$134 million to States and school districts to turn around failing schools. Last week I announced new guidelines to help States invest in what works to do just that.

I want to thank you for your partnership in the accountability movement and ask you to continue to work with us to strengthen our focus on that.

Another issue of increasing importance to States is the growing challenge presented by the lack of prescription drug coverage for seniors. Many people don't know that States, through their Medicaid programs, are the single largest purchasers of drugs in the world. Increasing drug costs are likely to be one of the fastest growing components of Medicaid programs in the years to come. We all recognize, I believe, that we need to modernize and reform the Medicare program, to extend its life, to make it more efficient and more competitive and better able to meet the challenges of the baby boom generation's aging.

I hope, as part of this broader reform, we can work with you to develop a privately contracted, voluntary Medicare prescription drug benefit. It's a life and death issue for many seniors, and I don't think we should let another year pass without taking action. Tomorrow I will release a State-by-State analysis of the health, financing, and demographic challenges facing the Medicare program and the tens of millions of Americans it serves.

Finally, let me also say that this is a good year to secure permanent funding for the protection of precious lands across our Nation. I had a good discussion with Governor King about this last night. Last year Congress approved a substantial increase in our lands legacy initiative. Two weeks ago, as part of this effort, I announced \$60 million in grants to States to create parks, save open space, and protect forests. The new budget proposes another substantial increase, a record \$1.4 billion to protect land and coastal resources, and this year we've proposed to make the higher level permanent funding. At

least half of this funding would go to support State and local conservation efforts. I hope we can make this, too, our gift to the future.

Now, I'd like to call on Governor Leavitt to make some opening remarks, and I want to thank you again, sir, for what you said last night. It was terrific. Welcome.

[At this point, the roundtable discussion began.]

The President. I would just like to make one comment—and then I know Governor Leavitt has got an agenda—about the role of government in the new economy. All of you will be thinking about this. I think we need to think about how we can reasonably make more new markets or help to facilitate them; how we can remove barriers without undermining public interest to the private sector's development; and how we can make government more user-friendly. And I'll just give you a couple of examples.

One of the biggest fights we had here when we overhauled the telecommunications law, for the first time in 60 years, was the insistence, that we in the administration had, that we let as many entrepreneurs into this unfolding new business as possible. And now, everywhere I go, I see people who are doing terrifically well; have hired huge numbers of people, who didn't even have businesses 5 years ago, because we got Federal legislation that had an entrepreneurial focus. And I think all of us should be sensitive to that, because I know Tom Friedman talked to you the other day; he's one of many people who points out that, even though more of our growth than ever before is in private sector jobs, the role of government, while different, is still profoundly important. And if you make the wrong call on some of these things, you wind up paying for it for a long time to come.

We just had a financial—totally bipartisan financial modernization act pass the Congress last year that, I believe, is an example of removing impediments without undermining the public interest. We enacted the Community Reinvestment Act, but I think that we took a set of barriers out of the way of our financial institutions in maximizing the digital economy.

And then we've also tried to make Government more user-friendly. We have more and

more people filing their taxes electronically and relating to us in a lot of other ways. And I saw an article in my weekly reports just last night that at least one of you has already cleared the way for people to vote electronically, which will be an interesting challenge. If somebody wants to explain to me how we can do that and meet all the security needs, I'd be interested in it. Because I think, clearly, we're all going this way. I know many of you have advance voting. And interestingly enough, it's just to make government more user-friendly, and it's changing politics.

There's one State here where a congressional race was decided in the last election because of advance voting, and there was a totally different result on election day than in the advance voting period. But we all are going to have to be very creative.

The other thing I think we have to do is not shut ourselves out of any part of the world, and I want to talk to you more later about the importance of bringing China into the WTO, which I feel very strongly about, and I hope we'll have a chance to talk about that.

Thank you very much. We'll let the press leave, and we'll go on with the program.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:40 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Michael O. Leavitt of Utah, chairman, and Gov. Parris N. Glendening of Maryland, vice chairman, National Governors' Association; Gov. Angus S. King, Jr., of Maine; and Thomas Friedman, foreign affairs columnist, New York Times. The President also referred to LIHEAP, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

Statement on Funding for Amtrak *February 28, 2000*

There has never been a better time to expand our investment in Amtrak and the Nation's passenger railways. The number of Americans relying on Amtrak has continued to grow for 3 years in a row. And through sound financial management, Amtrak continues its movement toward viability.

Therefore, this year I am asking Congress to increase Amtrak funding by more than \$400 million, or more than 70 percent, in order to make investments to expand Amtrak